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ABSTRACT

As nineteenth century British feminists found that they could no longer "suffer and be still," they forged alliances with those male political personalities sympathetic to their suffrage demands. Yet these political alliances proved to be of little value in the fight for voting rights, as measures designed to widen the franchise met with continual parliamentary defeat. Abandoning all hope of achieving the vote through cooperation with political leaders, militant British feminists resorted to battlefield tactics and launched a campaign to call attention to their cause through the destruction of objects representing the social system that remained unresponsive to their demands. Of all organizations that worked for the vote, the largest, most visible, and most militant was the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). So important was the WSPU, in fact, that their particular methods of agitation formed the focal point for the entire suffrage movement. (Author/FL)

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From Prison to Citizenship: The Rhetoric of the Militant British Suffrage Movement

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From Prison to Citizenship: The Rhetoric of the Militant British Suffrage Movement

As nineteenth-century British feminists found that they could no longer "suffer and be still," they forged alliances with those political personalities sympathetic to their suffrage demands.[1] Yet political alliances proved to be of little value in the fight for the vote, as measures designed to widen the franchise met with continual parliamentary defeat. Abandonning all hope of achieving the vote through cooperation with political leaders, militant British feminists resorted to battlefield tactics and mounted a campaign designed to call national attention to their cause through the destruction of objects representing the social system that remained unresponsive to their suffrage demands. Of all organizations that worked for the vote, the largest, most visible and most militant was the Women's Social and Political Union.[2] So important was the WSPU, in fact, that their particular methods of agitation formed the focal point for the entire movement: then, as now, to speak of female suffrage struggles in Great Britain was to speak of WSPU activity.

This paper outlines events leading to the adoption of violent tactics by the WSPU and focuses specifically on the spiraling interaction of suffragette militancy and governmental response.[3] In so doing, this essay isolates and examines one particular phase of the British suffrage agitation in an attempt to explicate some of the rhetorical dimensions of an historical movement that based its actions on a "deeds not words" philosophy. Purposefully microscopic in nature,[4] such an examination of women suffrage rhetoric may help to explain the ways in which discourse functioned to provide "reason" for extreme feminine militancy in a culture that held especially dear the image of woman as a gentle and compassionate angel in the house.[5]

Speech scholars and historians agree that WSPU activity may be divided into three distinct phases.[6] The first period, that of peaceful agitation, was characterized by such actions as presentation of petitions to Parliament, dissemination of propaganda and lawful demonstration. The second phase of the movement, viewed as a time of militant activity, included establishment and escalation of attacks on property, wilful evasions of the law and production of increasingly inflammatory propaganda. The third and final period of WSPU activity encompassed the war years moratorium on violent behavior, a period in which suffragettes

united in support of Britain's war effort by working in munitions factories, hospitals, and the like. It is upon the second, militant phase of WSPU activity that this essay focuses, spanning the years 1908 to 1914. But before turning to this most violent period of suffragette agitation, some understanding of the organization's early goals and activities is required.

Formation and Early Activity of the WSPU

In 1903, Mrs. Emmeline Pankhurst and two of her daughters, Christabel and Sylvia, hosted a small group of women in their Manchester home. Their meeting adjourned following the formation of a new suffrage society called the WSPU. The fledgling organization, which adopted the phrase "Votes for Women" as its official slogan, pledged to operate independently of political parties and held as its primary objective the granting of female suffrage through direct opposition of parliamentary candidates who refused support for their cause.

Finding virtually no political support for their suffrage demands save that of ILP leader Keir Hardie, the WSPU staged a series of heckling campaigns from its Manchester headquarters. In May of 1905, for example,

Mrs. Pankhurst and a group of her followers traveled to London to hear discussion on the Women's Enfranchisement Bill. When the bill was talked out by prolonged debate on the advisability of requiring carts to carry tail-lights at night in the streets of the city, WSPU leaders held the first of many indignation meetings outside Parliament.

Other forms of heckling and legal confrontations followed this initial demonstration, as throughout 1905 and 1906 WSPU members attended Liberal party meetings in London and in the provinces to interrupt speakers with their oft-repeated query, "Will the Liberal Government give women the vote?" After one such heckling outburst at the Free Trade Hall in Manchester, both Christabel and Annie Kenney found themselves ejected from the meeting, arrested, fined and imprisoned. In an action clearly foreshadowing the strategies of direct confrontation and martyrdom for the cause that were to become WSPU trade-marks, Christabel refused payment of the fines, and served three days in prison. Despite her mother's admonition that "You have carried it far enough: now I think you ought to let me pay your fines and take you home,"[7] Christabel remained adamant, rebuked her mother by saying, "If you pay my fine I will never go home again," and

rebuffed even Churchill's offer to pay the debt.[8] Hardie telegraphed that the incident was "a dastardly outrage," but urged the women not to worry, for their imprisonment would "do immense good to the Cause."[9] This early lesson was not forgotten as the WSPU intensified its heckling maneuvers, increased its propaganda campaign and moved its headquarters to London in 1906.[10]

Although the WSPU increased in size and influence, with the opening of its Clement's Inn offices, the organization found itself confronted with a series of events designed either to temper the urgency of its suffrage demands or to thwart its activity entirely. The London press pronounced a boycott of WSPU news coverage, the Prime Minister, Henry Campbell-Bannerman, suggested in maddeningly paternalistic tones that the women "keep on pestering," and police mastered the art of large-scale arrests for the purpose of removing angry suffragettes from public places before they could command the attention of an audience. By 1908, Mrs. Pankhurst renounced what she termed the "outworn missionary methods" of petition and orderly demonstration. Two WSPU women smashed the windows at No. 10 Downing Street, then inhabited by Herbert Asquith, the great foe of women suffrage, and the spiralling interaction of suffragette

militancy and governmental reaction commenced in earnest.[11]

The Resort to Militancy

Wilful destruction of property, begun with simple window-smashing, escalated between 1908 and 1910 at a rate that shocked both governmental officials and the general public. The WSPU responded to this attention with continued acts of militancy. Jailed suffragettes hunger-struck in prison to secure early release, and now threw rocks with specific messages attached, such as the one thrown at a motor car by Lady Constance Lytton that carried the words "To Lloyd George -- Rebellion against tyranny is obedience to God -- Deeds, not words." More and more, WSPU members concentrated on justifying their militant behaviors rather than on justifying their demands for the franchise. As nondiscursive acts increased, the Government responded with harsher measures than it had previously adopted, trying the suffragette leaders as common criminals for attempting to "rush" the House of Commons, and instituting force-feeding in jails to counteract hunger-strikes.

Yet surprisingly, in the midst of seemingly endless reaction and counter-reaction, the WSPU's firm commitment to militant activity developed in 1910, not with greater

acts of violence, but with a cautiously well-planned truce with the government.[12] The organization suspended all destructive militant activity as a show of good faith in Asquith's Conciliation Bill, but recognized also the advantage such a concession afforded them. While Christabel acknowledged that passage of the bill would avert the need for more severe acts of militancy, she remained skeptical of Asquith's promise to give female suffrage fair consideration, and noted that "Strategically, . . . a pause in militancy would be valuable, for it would give time for familiarity to fade, so that the same methods could be used again with freshness and effect."[13]

The truce was short-lived, as Asquith's Conciliation Bill failed and he announced his support for a Manhood Suffrage Bill. The Prime Minister refused to discuss the matter with a suffragette deputation and Christabel responded with both words and deeds. In an article in Votes for Women, the official WSPU newspaper, she wrote that Asquith's actions constituted "a message of defiance to us" and forced the organization to "revert to a state of war." As she explained:

> At the beginning of the present Parliament we declared a truce, which, if the Government acted in the same spirit of reasonableness and conciliation

> that we have displayed, would have ended in peace; but the Prime Minister, by his recent statement . . . has put an end to all hope of a peaceful settlement of the issue between us, "Negotiations are over. War is declared."[14]

Severe, bloody violence testified to the sincerity of Christabel's pronouncement. On November 18, a day noted as Black Friday, waves of women marched in procession to Parliament Square to protest the Government's dismissal of their suffrage demand. Home Secretary Churchill ordered police to stop the women, but advised that few arrests should be made. The result was a disastrous confrontation. Churchill failed to account for the almost reckless persistence of the women and for the vindictive manner in which police responded. The marchers were battered, bruised and assaulted by police, receiving injuries from which two women died and many others were permanently crippled. Nearly two hundred women were arrested following the incident and another that occurred four days hence, but Churchill ordered that most be discharged without trial; there would be, he declared, "no martyrs" in the situation. The WSPU was a "copious fountain of mendacity," and the Government would not permit transformation of the women's tragedy into a triumph for

their cause.[15]

In the aftermath of Black Friday, WSPU leaders attempted unsuccessfully to secure interviews with Government leaders. Their final efforts at peaceful negotiation rebuffed, the women articulated their arguments with the stone, renewing their window-smashing raids with intensity and finally resorting to arson in 1911.[16] Justification for such action became the primary rhetorical problem for the organization: its members proclaimed stone-throwing as a time-honored political argument and compared their militant behaviors to the Franchise Riots before the 1832 Reform Bill in which Nottingham Castle was burned and large portions of Bristol were vandalized. If existing militant methods evoked little response, the WSPU could resort only to greater acts of violence. As Christabel had warned, "When we see that those methods are failing of their purpose, then we shall know . . . to take . . . the hard and dangerous course [and] no man and no woman can foresee the end of it."[17]

By 1912 and 1913, the WSPU fully embraced an ideology of war. Christabel retreated to Paris and threatened just before her exile, "We will terrorize the lot of you."[18] Mrs. Pankhurst, sentenced to three years penal

servitude, declared that she was "at war with the Government," and counseled a London Pavillion audience that only human life remained sacred in the fight for the franchise.[19] "With that one exception," she asserted, "we are justified in using all methods resorted to in time of war."[20] The WSPU continued to justify extreme militancy in the name of war even as guerrilla tactics assumed monstrous proportions: churches, mansions, libraries and railway stations were burned, works of art were defaced, M.P.s were assaulted with bags of flour, red pepper and horsewhips, and the slogan "Votes for Women" appeared etched in acid on golf courses and other public grounds.[21]

Governmental response to the "war" assumed increasingly stringent forms. WSPU headquarters were raided, suffragette presses and propaganda were confiscated and new laws were hastily enacted to suppress as much of the militancy as possible. Yet even new Home Secretary Reginald MacKenna, author of the Prisoner's Temporary Discharge for Ill Health Bill,[22] despairingly admitted in the Commons that there existed only four possible solutions to the suffragette dilemma: to permit the women to die in prison, to deport them all, to commit them as lunatics, or to give them the vote.[23]

The advent of World War I kept the Government from dealing with any of these possibilities. Suffragettes focussed their energies on the war effort, declaring unconditional support for the cause of freedom and the empire. "We Suffragettes," Christabel stated, "believe that it is our duty to do all we can to rouse the individual citizen to fight for the freedom and independence . . . of this Empire . . . . as militant women, we may be able to do something to rouse the spirit of militancy in men."[24] But what of the women's own battle? Had militancy and martyrdom departed from "reason" sufficiently far to render their activities meaningless?

Militancy and Martyrdom -- Logic or Lunacy?

Historical assessments of suffragette militancy treat WSPU violence as a novel and remarkable occurrence, but tend to dismiss the possibility that such militant responses were well-reasoned reactions to the situation in which women found themselves. For example, Alfred Havinghurst asserts that :

> It is fairly evident that the militant tactics of the suffragettes merely alienated those who were opposed and annoyed those who were favorably

> disposed. More intelligent and more responsible methods of propaganda very likely would have brought at least limited women's suffrage to Britain before 1914. As it was, such legislation had to wait until after the war.[25]

While Havinghurst admits that the social climate of England was condusive to revolt as the country moved into a new century, he clearly views suffragette militancy as less than well-reasoned.

Andrew Rosen's reflections on suffragette militancy parallel Havinghurst's, as he refuses to acknowledge rationality in the WSPU and looks instead to psychological explanations for the combative acts of the organization.[26] Even Sheila Rowbotham, frequently sympathetic to the plight of women in such situations, concludes of the suffragettes that "Once they had begun to adopt militant tactics, the choices closed in on them."[27] The WSPU, she maintains, lost more public support than it gained and alienated needed members as a result of its methods.

Such assessments fail to consider the evolution of the militant movement's strategy. From heckling at political gatherings, to wilful destruction of property, WSPU success depended on evoking reactions from those who held political power. Quite naturally, then, escalation

of violence followed each governmental attempt to suppress militant activity. In purely pragmatic terms, the suffragettes felt compelled to wage greater and greater battles when "ordinary" forms of illegal behavior met with suspended sentences and thus failed to reach or even divide the male ruling class. In addition to seeking arrest and martyrdom (thus securing publicity for the cause), in the final years of violence, the WSPU attempted to destroy the base of their oppressors' power by attacking property. Opposition to female suffrage might be eroded if mounting insurance claims argued with persuasive consistency that the militants could no longer be ignored.[28]

Examination of the rhetorical choices made by WSPU leaders during the militant phase of the movement confirms these observations. An air of inevitability typified the organization's rhetoric at the height of its violent activity: the women were at war with the Government, and whatever the price, the war would be won. Movement leaders willingly sacrificed the mass support they had earlier commanded and freely jeopardized their personal safety in the battle for the ballot. The acts of stone-throwing, hunger-striking and arson required no additional rhetorical justification or explanation, for the goal had come to santify the behavior: "We have a duty to

perform," an eminent suffragette remarked, "just like the soldiers, who fight for their country."[29]

Thus with the adoption of nondiscursive forms of protest, the WSPU did not "lurch on from sensation to sensation" blindly; militancy and martyrdom were formed of reason and accompanied by reason.[30] As Christabel asserted, "We are going to fight. We will fight our way to freedom. Years ago, when we began this militant agitation, the cost of the warfare was counted; we accepted the price then."[31]

Notes

[1](Mrs.)Sarah Stickney Ellis, The Daughters of England, their Position in Society, Character and Responsibilities (London: Fisher, 1842), p. 73. Mrs. Ellis' thesis in this and her other manuals of conduct for Victorian women dealt with the notion that a woman's greatest power lay in her ability to influence. In lieu of this capacity, it was her "highest duty" to "suffer and be still".

[2] At the height of its agitation, the WSPU retained 10,000 members, with approximately 1,000 engaged in militant activity. See Marian Ramelson, The Petticoat Rebellion: A Century of Struggle for Women's Rights (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1967), p. 165.

[3] The term "suffragette" was coined in 1906 by the London Daily Mail as a means of identifying those suffragists who employed militant tactics. What began as a derogatory label soon was embraced wholeheartedly by the WSPU. As Christabel Pankhurst remarked, the name was "happily adopted. There was a spirit in it, a spring that we liked." In Unshackled: The Story of How We Won the Vote (London: Hutchinson, 1959), pp. 62-63.

[4] For a helpful discussion of the types of social movement studies conducted in the field of Speech Communication, see Suzanne Volmar Riches and Malcolm O. Sillars, "The Status of

Movement Criticism," Western Speech, 44 (1980), 275-287.

[5] James Andrews argues for the benefits of a case-study approach to the examination of historical social movements when he asserts that the task of rhetorical scholars who undertake movement criticism is to answer the question "how does public discourse attempt to explain what is going on in such a way as to account for and shape particular events?" A theory of social movement rhetoric can most fruitfully be generated, Andrews continues, "when it can be grounded in the history of movement rhetoric . . . theory can enrich historical investigation when it serves as a stimulus to the historical-critical perspective, but . . . theory as a prescriptive guide to historical investigation is potentially stultifying and dangerously misleading." In "History and Theory in the Study of the Rhetoric of Social Movements: A Position Paper for the SCA Seminar on Rhetoric and Social Movements," presented at the annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association, San Antonio, TX., 1979, pp. 2 and 5.

[6] See, for example, Roberta Kay Carson, "From Teacups to Terror: The Rhetorical Strategies of the Women's Social and Political Union, 1903-1918," Diss. Univ. of Iowa, 1975; Josephine Kamm, Rapiers and Battleaxes: The Women's Movement and its Aftermath (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966); Antonia Raeburn, The Militant Suffragettes (London: Joseph, 1973), and Rose Tremain, Freedom for Women (New York: Ballantine, 1973). Judith Trent, in her essay "Women's Suffrage Struggle in England: A Study of the Social Movement," Michigan Speech

Association Journal, 5 (1970), 44, discusses three phases of the suffrage movement, but excludes examination of the war years moratorium on militant activity.

[7] Emmeline Pankhurst quoted in Midge Mackenzie, Shoulder to Shoulder: A Documentary (New York: Knopf, 1975).

[8] Christabel Pankhurst quoted in Estelle Sylvia Pankhurst, The Life of Emmeline Pankhurst: The Suffragette Struggle for Women's Citizenship (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1935), p. 52.

[9] Keir Hardie quoted in E. Sylvia Pankhurst, The Suffragette: The History of the Women's Militant Suffrage Movement, 1905-1910 (London: Gay and Hancock, 1911), p. 35.

[10] Andrew Rosen, Rise Up, Women! (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 23. Rosen argues that Hardie's support of the incident coupled with "The ways in which the ILP had dramatized the sense of martyrdom evoked by imprisonments [in the Boggart Hole Clough incident] had not been lost on Christabel." Some nine years following this incident, "Christabel was to decide that deliberately sought-after imprisonment . . . would reap substantial publicity for women's enfranchisement " and give the movement the kind of public support it could not secure "through conventional methods of agitation."

[11] This first act of wilful property damage was not suggested by WSPU leaders, but was sanctioned after the fact. Note Frederick Pethick-Lawrence's statement that "At first Christabel frowned on these more violent methods, but later they were recognized and planned." In Fate Has Been Kind (London: Hutchinson, 1943), p. 81.

[12] Carson, 41.

[13] Unshackled, p. 153.

[14] Christabel Pankhurst, "We Revert to a State of War," Votes for Women, 25 Nov. 1910.

[15] Antonia Raeburn, The Suffragette View (New York: St. Martin's, 1976), p. 47.

[16] The first act of arson consisted in the burning of a letter-box. Further cases followed, but the suffragettes were careful to limit their range of targets. Arson occurred only in the early morning hours and only on empty premises.

[17] Christabel Pankhurst, "On the Political Outlook," Votes for Women, 29 July 1910.

[18] Christabel Pankhurst quoted in David Mitchell, The Fighting Pankhursts: A Study in Tenacity (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 307.

[19] Emmeline Pankhurst quoted in Mackenzie, p. 215.

[20] Emmeline Pankhurst quoted in E. Pankhurst, Life, p. 124.

[21] Note particularly Mrs. Pankhurst's statement that "There is something that governments care far more for than human life, and that is the security of property, and so it is through property that we shall strike the enemy." In My Own Story (New York: Hearst, 1914), p. 265.

[22] The Act was unaffectionately termed the Cat and Mouse Act, and provided that women who hunger-struck and suffered as a result of force-feeding in prison could be released from jail until they regained their strength, whereupon they would be re-arrested to serve the remainder of their sentences.

[23] Rose Tremain, "What Kind of Victory?" British History Illustrated, 4 (1978), 25-26.

[24] Christabel Pankhurst, "The Great War," (London: Lincoln's Inn House, The Women's Social and Political Union, 1914), p. 3.

[25] Alfred F. Havinghurst, Twentieth-Century Britain (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 133.

[26] Rosen, see for example, pp. 39-46 and 178-209.

[27] Sheila Rowbotham, Hidden From History: Rediscovering Women in History from the 17th Century to the Present (New York: Random House, Vintage, 1976), p. 88.

[28] Indeed, insurance claims reached huge amounts. In 1913 alone, for example, the London Daily Mail estimated that property damage exceeded half a million pounds. See E. Pankhurst, Life, p. 128.

[29] Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, "The Faith That Is In Us," Votes for Women, 23 April 1909.

[30] Rowbotham, p. 87.

[31] Christabel Pankhurst quoted in E. Pankhurst, My Own, p. 254.